



## Arabic on the Dahlak Islands (Eritrea)

Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle

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### **Arabic on the Dahlak islands (Eritrea)**

Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle (LLACAN-INALCO, CNRS)

This paper is devoted exclusively to Arabic spoken on the Dahlak archipelago, in Eritrea. It is a variety of Arabic quite poorly documented so far. There are a few studies on the Arabic varieties spoken on the African coast of the Red sea (cf. Simeone-Senelle 2000, 2005a & 2005b, 2009, Kassim Mohamed 2012) but none of them has been dedicated particularly to Arabic spoken on the islands. By revising data published previously and by updating them with the new ones collected since, this talk attempts mainly to assess the specific features of Dahalik Arabic compared with the Arabic lingua franca spoken on the African coast of the Red Sea.

#### **Data**

Collected during fieldworks (in 1997, and between 2002 and 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Unique but not recent. They reflect a time-limited situation before 2007.

#### **Corpus**

Based on spontaneous texts, recorded with men and some women and young people who are essentially DHLK and/or Afar native speakers. Very few Arabic native speakers, all are bi- or multilingual. One cannot assess possible differences between native and not native Arabic speakers.

#### **The archipelago and its population**

The Dahlak archipelago in Eritrea is lying off the port of Massawa (cf. Maps)

Only four islands are permanently inhabited

1) the greatest one, Dahlak Kebir (=D.K.), in the centre of the archipelago. 2) Nora [**nōra**], to the north of D.K., 3) Dehil [**dehil**], to the north-west and close to the continent. In 2006 the permanent population added up to almost 3.000 islanders, with about 2000 on D.K., 380 on Nora and 600 on Dehil 4) Dese? (exclusively Afar).

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## Sociolinguistic situation

Three languages (Afar, Dahalik, Arabic) are in contact on DK and Nora, and only two on Dehil (Arabic and DHLK). There are distributed as follows:

- 1) Dahalik. DHLK (Ethio-semitic language ) is the predominant language with 1.680 native speakers on 3.000 islanders. Mother tongue of 56,5% islanders (60% on DK, Nora 60%, Dehil 42% )
- 2) 'Afar (Cushitic language) is the mother tongue of about 780 islanders (26% of the population: 38% on D.K. and less than 5% on Nora, no Afar on Dehil)
- 3) Arabic is minority with 521 islanders claiming to have Arabic as mother tongue (17,5%). Their number can be estimated to about 2% on DK, to 35% on Nora and to 58 % on Dehil where they represent a majority.

**1**            **ána**            **śárabí**            **el-jins**            **ḥággi**            **śárabí**            **el-ʔásel**            **śárabí**  
 PR.1SG          Arab            ART-identity          CON.SUF.PR.1SG          Arab            ART-origin          Arab  
 I am Arab, my identity is Arab, the origin is Arab,

**wa-náḥna**            **náštaber**            **hīna**            **dáhlakīn**            **ille**            **yaguluḥ lana**  
 and-PR.1PL          1P.IPFV.regard\_as          here          Dahalak            except          3PL.IPFV.say.PREP.SUF.PR.1PL  
 but here we regard ourselves as Dahlak people. However they tell us :

**éntum**            **śarab**            **fīḥbēt**            **natkellem**            **dahlak...**            **tábšan**            **xálā s**  
 2PL                  Arab            in.ART-house          1PL.IPV.speak          Dahlaki            of-course          finally  
 “You are Arabs”. At home we speak Dahlak(i). Of course, finally

**asbaḥna**            **eretriyen**            **dáhlakīn**            **náḥna**            **el-yōm**  
 become.PFV.1PL          Eritreans            Dahlaks            PR.1PL            to\_day  
 we became Dahalik Eritreans. Now, we

**náštaber**            **náfsana**            **dáhlakīn**  
 1PL.IPFV.regard\_as          self.SUF.PR.1PL          Dahlaks  
 regard ourselves as Dahlaks (Dahlak people)

Everywhere, the prevalent situation is multilingualism. In the same district, the same village and the same family people of different mother-tongues are in contact. The following example is an illustration of this situation. See the addendum (below, p. 13): linguistic situation within one family

The woman (Afar native speaker) answers to the question ‘what languages do you (SG.) speak?’

**2**            **nitkéllem**            **śárabí**            **ḥábba**            **ḥábba**            **maśa-l-śárabíye**  
 1.IPFV. speak          Arabic            a-little            a\_little            with -ART-Arab\_people  
 I speak Arabic just a little, with the Arabs,

**maśa-d-dáhlakíye**            **nitkellem**            **dáhalik** (sic)  
 with -ART-Dahlak\_people          1.IPFV. speak.          Dahalik  
 with the Dahlak inhabitants, I speak Dahalik,

<b>u-maṣa-d-dénkaliye</b>	<b>nitkellem</b>	<b>dénkali</b>
and-with-ART-Dankali_people	1.IPFV. speak	Dankali

and with the inhabitants of Dankaliya (coastal Afar region), I speak Dankali (Afar)

<b>tígre</b>	<b>wállah</b>	<b>má-naṣref</b>	<b>kátir</b>
Tigre	oh_ God	NEG-1.IPFV.know	much

as for Tigre, Oh God!, I don't know it much

Except some very old women, any adult speaks at least two languages: her/his mother tongue plus a second language, and many people have a passive knowledge of a third or even of a fourth.

The situation varies according to the island and the distribution of the inhabitants speaking different languages within the same village

The school on the three islands being in Arabic, all educated children all know Arabic, in its standard form.

In most villages, the linguistic communities interact on a daily basis. This situation is furthered by the short distances between the villages and the common school gathering children from all communities.

Due to mixed marriages and shared daily life with children from other linguistic communities, many children actually have two first languages. One of the two is always Dahalik.

For the women the situation is different. They are in close contact with their neighbours in their village, but they are not used to travel outside the island. Some Tigre women speak Tigre with their young children but all of them speak Afar or Dahalik, (or Arabic), depending to their husband's mother tongue and the neighbourhood.

For men the situation is more complex. In addition to Dahalik, Arabic, and Afar, they know **Tigre** and **Tigrinya**, sometimes **Saho**, few English words. On Dehil many of them know Tigre and are able to speak it fluently.

The oldest know and speak **Amharic** and have some notions of **Italian**.

On Dehil there are no Afar, the Arabic native speakers and the Dahalik native speakers live in two distinct but neighbouring districts (see the map : Dahar and ṢAd).

The trade exchanges and the professional and personal relations with the eastern bank of the Red sea, an exclusively Arabic speaking area, are favouring the expansion of Arabic.

### **Arab presence on the Archipelago**

Links between the African and Arabian coasts are attested since Antiquity and are doubtless much older. Many parameters lead to think that Arabic was spoken in the region before the

Islamisation. Presently, some islanders who claim to be Arabs because one of their male ancestor came from an Arab country, are presently Dahalik native speakers (ex. 1). On Nora they claim to be there for three or four generations, sometimes more on D.K.

On D.K: Migration from different Arab countries: Egypt, Sudan, but mainly from Yemen (the Tihami coast, Aden area, sometimes Hadramawt), and Saudi Arabia (Farsan island).

On Dehil, in the 19th century the ṢAwāzim (Rashayda) came from Saudi Arabia (about 348 on Dehil). Cf. the map Ṣīla Ṣawāzim

### **Arabic in the state of Eritrea**

Only nearly 1% of the citizens have an Arabic language as mother tongue (AbrahaWende, p.c. 2000)

### **Status of Arabic**

Arabic (MSA variety): official status in the state of Eritrea. It is one of the three ‘working languages’, together with Tigrinya and English. It is taught in school as a second language in the country, and as the medium of instruction and as a subject in primary schools on the northern coast, including the archipelago (see below).

Arabic is also the language of the religion in this area where all people are Muslims.

Religion and social and cultural usefulness confer prestige to Arabic, and usually the parents prefer their children attend the Arabic school (even in the areas where it is not spoken). It is one of the reasons why speakers claim to be Arabs.

### **Arabic varieties on the islands**

1) Modern Standard Arabic: the Eritrean educational policy has been implemented in 1997 before Dahalik has been listed. On the Archipelago the policy has been aligned with that applied to the coast where Arabic is predominant, thus Arabic is the only language of school education.

2) Other Arabic dialects

- From Arab countries (Yemen, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Emirates).

- TV programs (movies, varieties broadcast, television quiz shows, news, series of cartoons)
- Relatives in Yemen and Saudi Arabia
- Fishing and trade with Arabic monolingual areas.

- Arabic Lingua franca: During sea navigation in the Red sea and Indian Ocean (essentially Gulf of Aden).

ALF on the African coast gives evidence of contacts with

Arabic dialects, Cushitic languages (Afar and Saho), two Ethio-Semitic languages (Tigre and Tigrinya).

The range of contacts influencing the DHLK Arabic is limited to three languages (Arabic, Afar, Dahālik), one of them is endemic to the islands.

I'll discuss the possible impact of Dahalik on Arabic spoken on the islands, using examples different from ALF and collected only with the islanders.

## PHONOLOGY AND PHONETICS

1) on Dehil the voiceless emphatic **ṭ** is clearly pharyngealized under the influence of DHLK spoken on this island.

2) Velar and uvular consonants often overlap but not exactly in the same way as in AFL

Realizations of etymological consonants in ALF and DHLK Arabic

	emphatic			interdentals		dento-alveolar	palato-alveolars		velars.		uvulars
MSA	*ṭ	*ṣ	*ḍ, ḍ̥	*θ	*ð	*z	*š	*ž	*ɣ	*x	*q
ALF	(ṭ) t	(ṣ) s	(ḍ) d, z	(θ) t, s	(ð) d, z	z, d	(š) s, ss, ~s	j, y, g	ɣ, q, g	k	(q) gɣ, ɣ, ɣ̤, k, ʔ
DHLK	ṭ, (tt)	ṣ, s	d, z	θ, t, s	ð, d, z	z, d	š, s, ~s	j, y, g	(ɣ) q	(x) k	q, ɣ, (ɣ̤), k, (ʔ)

At the phonetic level, the **assimilation** of the lateral fricative to the voiced bilabial occlusive is attested only in the corpus in DHLK Arabic:

3            **bl > bb kébbi** ‘before me’

## MORPHO-SYNTAX

### Verb Conjugation

- In the IPFV conjugation, use of the same form for both singular and plural first-person (no number mark). This phenomenon is less rare than suggested in Simeone-Senelle (2000: 166, 2005: 271). Cf. ex (2)

4            **tigrinya      má-naʃref      má-darastö      má-ʃaref**  
               Tigrinya      NEG-1.IPFV know      NEG-learn.PFV.1SG.SUF.PR      NEG-1.IPFV know  
               I don't know Tigrinya, I didn't learn it, I don't know

But also

5            **əmši                      əmši                      marbuṭ ṭ**  
               1SG.IPFV.walk      1SG.IPFV.walk      hindred.M.SG  
               I walk, I walk hindered

- In the PFV, the 1st and 2nd SG have a regular final **-a**. This phenomenon is more widespread in DHLK Arabic than in ALF.

6            **samafta** ‘I heard, I understand’ ; **kúnta** ‘I was / you (SG) were’

Similarly to DHLK<sup>2</sup>, there is gemination shift

7            **ba-ʔaxaberrik** ‘I’ll inform you’ and **xabbarato** ‘he informed him’

**The system of TAM auxiliaries** is more reduced than in ALF: except **kān** aspectual and temporal marker, DHLK-Arabic does not use auxiliaries.

- **ba=**(particle) clitic to the verb in the IPFV form has a concomitant or prospective value

8            **dahhin**    **lamma**    **nrūh**            **ba=tšū fu**  
               now        when        1PL.IPFV.go        CONC=2PL.see  
               Now when we go there, you will see

- **participle** of some verbs (motion, cognition) has the same value as **ba=IPFV** Verb:

9            **gallaha**                            **ana**            **rāyah**            **mšawaʕ**  
               3M.SG.say.to.SUF.PR.3F.SG    PR.PERS.1SG    PTCL.SG.go        Massawa  
               He told her ‘I am going to Massawa’

10          **ʕarif**                            **muš**  
               PTC.P.SG.know                INT?  
               You know, don’t you?

- **baga** ‘to stay’ ~ ‘and then’. (enunciative particle)

11          **bága**            **héði**            **yaʕidi**    **jā b**                            **áḥmed**    **sayīr**  
               and\_then    DEM.PROX    Yaʕidi    3M.SG.PFV.give        Ahmed    small  
               And then this Yaʕidi gave birth to Ahmed Junior

12          **...bága-l-láḥam**            **yittálləʕu-ho**  
               and\_then-ART-flesh        3.PL.IPFV.remove-SUF.PR.3M.SG  
               ‘... and then the flesh, they removed it.

## SYNTAX

### - In the noun phrase

#### Genitive construction

**wálad ḥággi** < child/ CON-SUF.PR.1SG > ‘my son’.

Another construction attested on the archipelago is not so common in Arabic :

13          **ménni awlā** < from.SUF.PR.1SG/ children’ ‘my sons’

<sup>2</sup>In DHLK the opposition PFV ~IPFV is marked by gemination of radical C2 : PFV **C1aC2aC3a** and IPFV **PI-C1C2C2e/iC3**

## - In nominal and verbal sentences

**Word order:** the predicative copula in nominal sentence, the verb in the verb sentence: at the end of the sentence. This phenomenon may be enhanced by the contact of DHLK (same word order as Afar: SOV).

- 14            **hē di**        **nahna**                      **baladna**                      **hiya**  
                  DEM.       PR.PERS.1PL                      country.SUF.PR.1PL       (PERS.PR.3F.SG)COP

This one, for us, is our country

- 15            **ka n**            **insā n**        **yaʃni**        **maʃa**        **himar**        **haqqo**                      **yemši**  
                  AUX.3M.SG       human       indeed       with       donkey       CON.SUF.PR.3M.SG       3M.SG.IPFV.walk

In fact one human-being was walking with his donkey

Auxiliary after the verb

- 16            **ħarb**        **isáwwū**                      **wu-igeṭṭəṣū**                      **ka nū**                      **en-na s**  
                  war        3PL.IPFV.do                      and-3PL.IPFV.slaughter                      AUX.PL                      ART-people  
                  They waged war and slaughter people

## Agreement

The agreement system is more fluctuant than that of AFL. The latter is marked by the contact with the complex concordance system of Afar where the verb usually agrees neither in number (whatever the number of its noun subjects, the verb is in the singular)<sup>3</sup>. As for DHLK, the agreement with collective (and occasionally with plural) is very irregular and often unpredictable with respect to feminine or masculine, 3rd person plural or singular. The concordance system in DHLK Arabic appears to be the result of merging both systems.

The counted noun is invariable in both languages.

- 17            **náḥna yegu lukúllana min hīne** ‘we say all of us are from here’ (verb in the 3PL.)  
 18            **na skúllo** all people .**kúll-oh šáyyādin** ‘all of them are fisherman’  
 19            **ʃáfar tugu l** < 3F.SG.IPFV.say> ‘Afar people say ..’,  
                  **el-ʃáfar kúlla-ha** ‘all the Afar’ (Afar is always F.SG in Afar and DHLK)  
 20            **tnīn makā n** ‘two places’.  
 21            **el-ħarīm yarqaş** and in the same text **el-ħarīm yerquşu** ‘The women dance’

## VOCABULARY

**əşti** (in the IPFV) ‘want’

- 22            **eş tīşti** ‘What do you want?’

or in a broader meaning including possibility and eventuality:

<sup>3</sup> The Afar rule of the so-called ‘reverse gender’ does not overtly affect the AFL system.



23      **fī-hō ri**      **kaman**      **tišti**      **miya-wu-xamsīn**      **kilo ...**  
 EXIST-hori      also      2F.IPFV.want      100-and-50      kilo

There are also hori<sup>4</sup>, you can load 150 kilos,

24      **fi-wahad**      **kebīr**      **tišta**      **miyét**      **kilo**  
 EXIST-one      big      3F.SG.IPFV.want      100      kilo

there is a big one, it can load 100 kilos

(– **ata** ‘to come’ in ALF is not attested in my corpus where **agā**, **ajā**, is usual)

- **raʔe** always in the PFV ‘see’(as in Tihama), besides **šaʔ** in the PFV and IPFV ‘see and look’

25      **rē-tu-hum**      **lamma**      **rē-tu-hum**      **šaʔ-ful-juráh**  
 PFV.1SG.see-EP.SUF.PR.3PL      when      cf. first clause      PFV.3PL.see-ART.wound

I met them, when I met them, they looked at the wound

– ‘water’ **mō** (attested only in the corpus from DHLK), **mō ya**

– ‘now’ **délhin**, **déhhin**

- ‘inside’ **bēn el-fərūm** ‘inside the four’

Besides fishery vocabulary many lexemes are etymologically borrowings from Arabic dialects of the Red sea area (Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen) and from other foreign languages.

**bónsola** (<*bussola*) ‘compass’), **lamba** ‘bulb’; **fā nus** ‘lighthouse ; lamp’; **ítrik** (< *electric*) ‘flashlight’, **duš** ‘satellite dish’, **fībər** ‘boat made of fibreglass’, **tan** ‘ton’; **ṭ/tárabeza** ‘(coffee) table’; **kínīn** ‘any pills’; **básta** ‘pasta’, **ba ni** ‘white bread’; **kō kiyan** (<*conchiglia* ? ‘seashell’) ‘(Trochus niloticus). Mother-of-pearl, any seashell that produces mother-of-pearl’; **šamaṭri** ‘cinnamon’ (< ‘from Sumatra’).

## CODESWITCHING

- towards Afar

26      **áh**      **wáhad**      **ʔáfari**  
 DEICT.ASS (afar)      one      Afar

This one is Afar

<sup>4</sup>Hori is a small wooden rowing boat for coastal fishing. Its size varies (but there are never more than 4 men on board). The smallest ones (one man on board) can be loaded on a bigger boat (sambuq), the sambuq anchors in open sea and unloads them. The men fish there and every evening or every two days they bring back their fishery produces to the anchored sambuq.

27      **tayribān**      **kébbi**      **kam**      **ʕam**      **yekkee**  
 about      before.SUF.PR.1SG      how      year      3M.SG.PFV.happen.INT (Afar)  
 Did that event happen how many years ago approximately before my birth?

• towards DHLK

28      **ʔarmi**      **ʕá eš**      **bilā hu**  
 throw.IMP.SG      luggage      3M.SG.PFV.say.SUF.PR.3M.SG  
 He told him: 'Throw luggage!'

29      **ḥurmāti**      **wal...**      **wadaʕat**  
 wife.SUF.PR.1SG      ga...      give\_birth.PFV.3F.SG.  
 My wife ha...has given birth.

30      **ballu** </bilā hu for **gallu** 'he told him'

## HYPERCORRECTIONS AND REDUNDANCY

Phonetic variants of the same term within the same sentence :

31      **keθīr, kesīr, ketīr, ʕayīr, ʕaqīr; gárya, qárya;**  
**tumun qirā tnušš-uyirāt, gerā t** one eightof carat, half carat, carat'

Words of the same meaning

32      **kaman bárdó**

- different words for the same referent

33      **bā buṣ, safīna, markab,**

## CONCLUSION

Generally speaking the influence of DHLK on Arabic spoken on the islands is not as significant as it could be expected. DHLK is confined to the domestic life on the islands. Having no official status, it is depreciated even by many native speakers (some adults and all the young people). The influence of Arabic (AFL) on DHLK is increasing, in return DHLK influences ALF less and less. Both varieties tend to merge into one ALF. In DHLK Arabic few features spotted as being from DHLK language, are indeed just remnants tending to disappear, levelled by the increasing influence of ALF and the very endangerment of DHLK. As far as Afar, it has neither more nor less impact on this DHLK Arabic variety than on ALF of the coast of the Red Sea. The process of merging both varieties of Arabic into one ALF is irrevocably running.

## ABBREVIATIONS

### Languages:

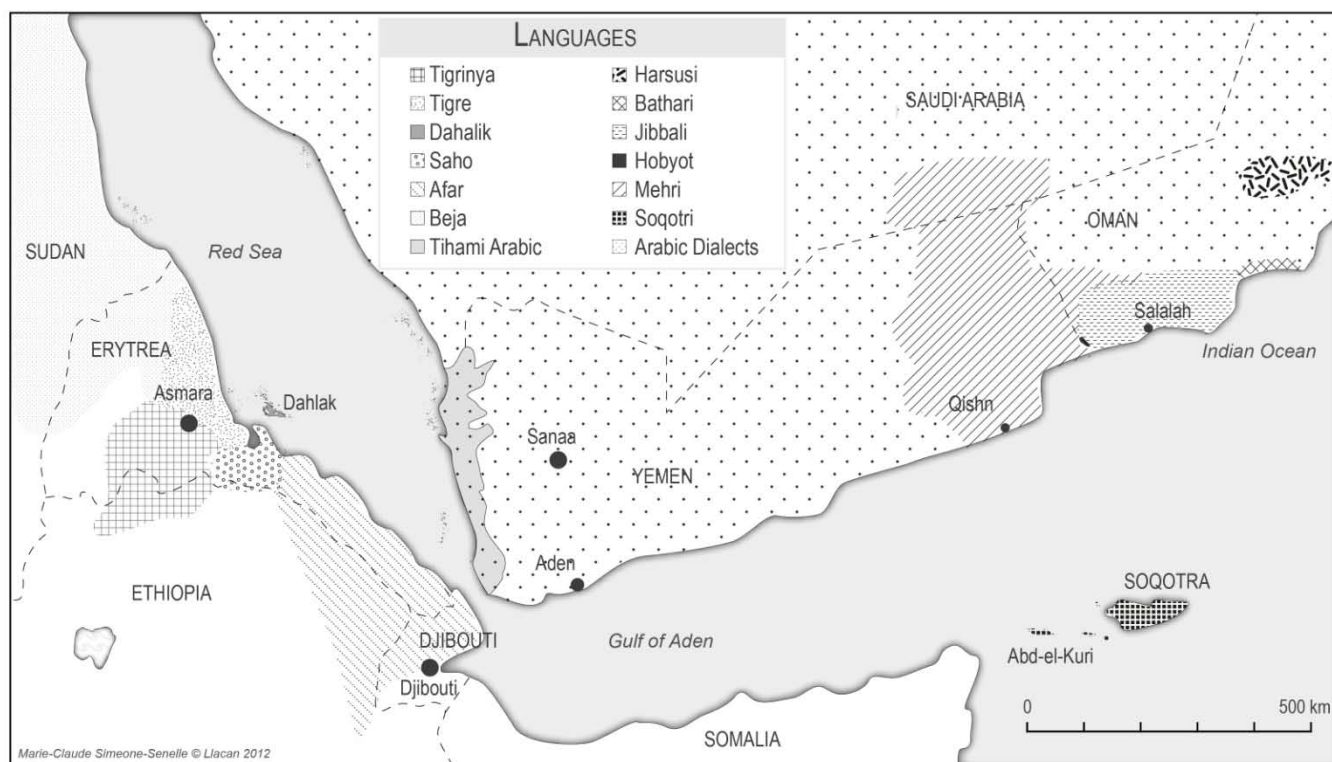
AFL Arabic Lingua Franca referring only to the varieties spoken along the Red sea coast of the Eritrean mainland - DHLK Dahlik (ADJ.) / Dahā'lik language -DHLK-Arabic including both varieties (mother-tongue and lingua franca on the islands)

## Glosses

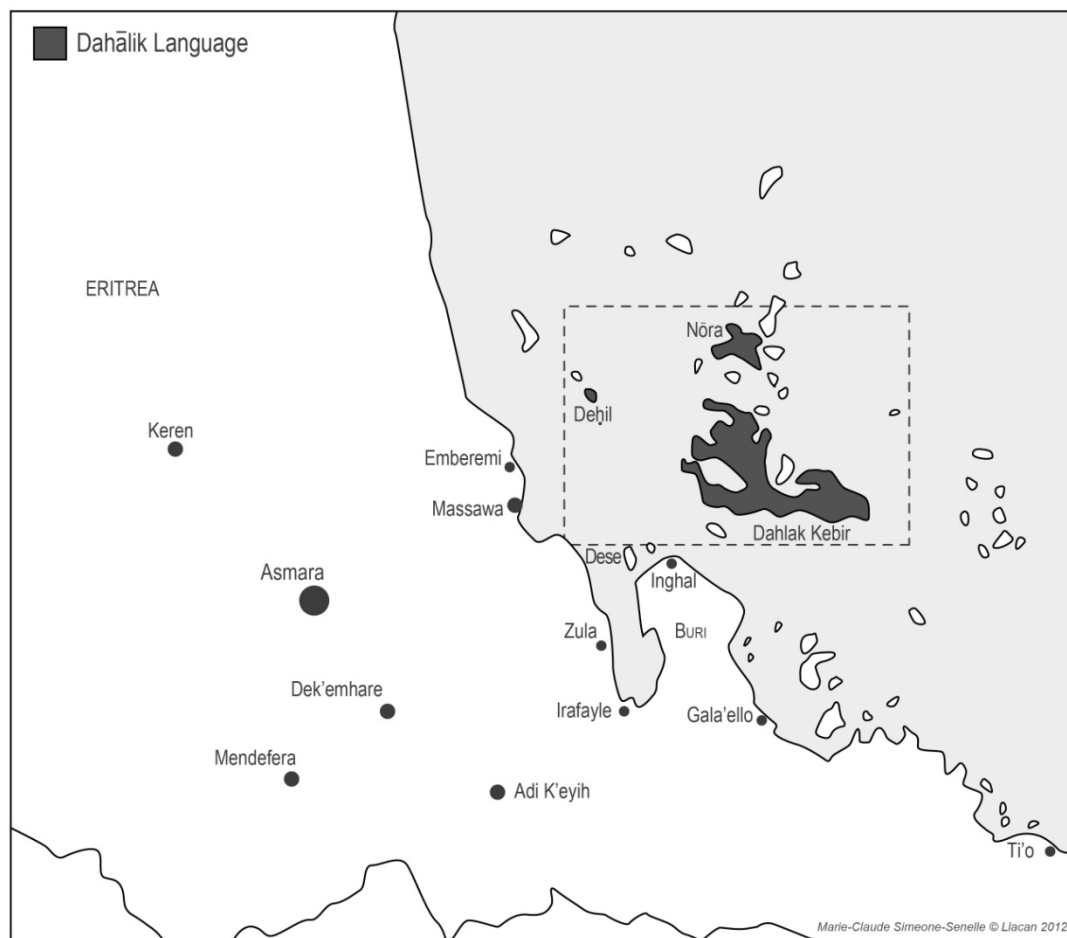
CON connector- IPFV imperfective- N noun - PI personal index - PFV perfective -  
PR pronoun - PTCL participle - SUF suffix, suffixed - V verb

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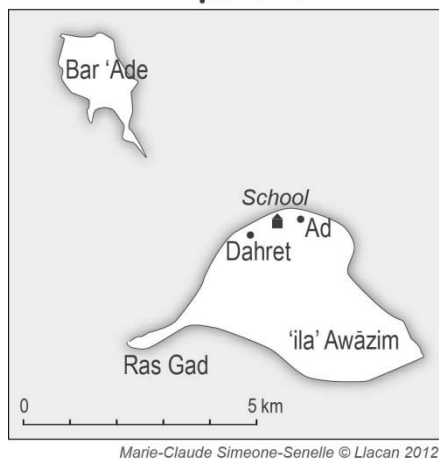
### DAHLAK ARCHIPELAGO



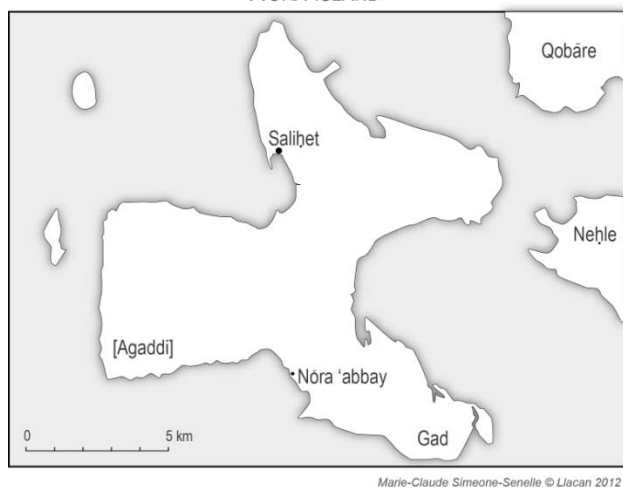
### DAHLAK KEBIR ISLAND



### DEHİL ISLAND



### NÖRA ISLAND



The linguistic situation in M.R.'s family (in 2006)  
 M.R. 55 years old – fisherman, trader.  
 born in Melīl (Dahlak Kebir). He has lived in Melīl for 24 years  
 In Melīl: ṢAfar, DHLK & Arabs in contact.  
 He attended Arabic school near Melīl, in Dasqo (exclusively DHLK)

### **M.R.'s parents**

In 2006 his father and mother were living in Jimhile, M.R and his family were living in Dubṣullu.

- The mother (ṢAfar, born in Melīl) speaks : **ṢAfar and Arabic**  
 with their 9 children (her father was of Egyptian origin)  
**Arab and DHLK**  
 with her neighbours (women)
- The father is born in Jimhile, **DHLK**  
 mother tongue, speaks **Arabic** and some **ṢAfar**

He speaks DHLK with M.R.

### **M.R.** his wife was ṢAfar. 10 children (7 sons, 3 daughters )

He considers **ṢAfar and DHLK** as his **mother-tongues**, and he speaks **Arabic** very fluently.  
 He knows **Tigrinya, Tigre, Amharic** (prisoner during DERG). Has notions of **Italian**, some words in **English**

He spoke **ṢAfar with his wife**

**ṢAfar with his daughters** (they do not attend school). In 2004, he has realized that her daughters spoke very well DHLK and knew the oral literature.

**Arabic** with his sons. They speak **ṢAfar** with their mother. All of them on the island speak DHLK